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ArtQuest and the ASI Art Reference Library

*Richard Hislop**

I am going to talk about the ASI Art Reference Library and about the ArtQuest online service. The ASI Art Reference Library is a data bank which has been created by Art Sales Index Ltd by gathering and publishing, over a 20 year period, results of international auction sales. ArtQuest is an online interrogation service which provides access to this data bank, 24 hours a day, 5 days a week.

At such a conference, I am a little shy of offering that little pair of words, 'online'. And yet I feel obliged to do so. There might be one or two people in the audience who are not quite clear as to what is meant. My definition, a very simple one:

Online implies telephone access to a data bank

On-line implies communication via a modern over normal audio telephone lines

Online implies interrogation by keyboard and terminal

Online implies response on video screen or printer

Now I am letting myself in for it. By giving one definition I am forced to make two more:

We need that for Data base and Data bank:

A Data Base is a collection of information

A Data Bank is a collection of facts

And I have to confound you straight away by saying that the ASI Art Reference Library could be described both as a Data base and Data Bank, which is why I try to avoid such self made traps by calling it the ASI Art Reference Library which is more explicit.

One last definition - and I promise no more - ASI means Art Sales Index Ltd. Now I can start (to describe any online service, it is necessary to cover 3 separate aspects):

1) Nature and source of information on the Data Bank

2) the interrogation service its simplicities, its complexities and its sophistications.

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3) the users - who they are and what they use the service for.

Source and Nature of Information

Information on the ASI Art Reference Library is gathered from auction sales catalogues. They are supplied by some 350 auctioneers around the world. Over 1500 catalogues are processed every year from some 20 different countries.

Currently these 1500 catalogues provide between 80,000 and 90,000 entries to the Data Bank each year. Initially, in 1970, we were recording only oil paintings and watercolours. Drawings were added from 1975 and sculpture and 3 dimensional works from 1983.

We record the works of artist of all nationalities and all periods of art.

Starting Prices

The criteria for entry is the auction price. We make no judgement as to the reputation of the artist nor the quality of his work. It is only the sale price. In 1970 the starting prices were 250 for oils and 150 for watercolours. Subsequently, these prices have been raised so as to allow for inflation. Currently they are:

Oils £450 +

Watercolours/Drawings f350 +

Sculpture/3D £750 +

In the brochure on ArtQuest there is a page which shows how starting prices have changed through the years and also how the Data Bank has grown.

The price recorded is the »hammer price« or the »knockdown price«. Buyers premium and commissions are not included. Conversion from one currency to another is made at the average exchange rate for the week in which the sale took place. Every result is recorded in the currency of the sale and in £ and S. Dimensions of works are given in inches and centimetres.

The languages in which the titles are recorded are English, French and Italian. We translate from German, Dutch and Scandinavian languages.

Every word in the title of a picture is indexed. With the title 900,000 works recorded on the Data Bank and remembering that French and Italian also appears, it is interesting to guess how many actual words are indexed.

When I looked at this 3 or 4 years ago, I was staggered to find that there were only 78,000 words! I had expected at least 1 million.

Artists Names

From 1970, we have built up a file of artists names which now exceeds 95,000. In addition to the name, we have recorded, where known, the nationality, dates of birth and death. We have recently begun to enlarge this name file by adding place of birth and death and we have plans to enter biographical data.

This name file plays an important part in the input procedures because it enables us to edit artist's names and ensure that only one approved name is recorded. You will not doubt appreciate that to the computer a minute difference in spelling will be interpreted as a different artist and located in a different place. (Bartholomew, Atkinson Grinshaw)

In addition to the authenticated works of an artist, we record also works which are attributed, or after or the school or circle, style or manner of or from the studio of. Altogether then, the information available for each of the 900,000 entries on the data bank is:

for the artist

- 1) name, nationality, dates of birth and death

for the picture or sculpture

- 1) the medium, title, dimensions, whether signed, date, initialled, lot number and whether illus, in catalogue

for the sale results

- 1) the price in £, S and local currency,

for the sale

- 1) the auctioneers code, the date and location of the sale

Users

ArtQuest users include the National Galleries in London and Washington the Courtauld Institute the Getty Centre, Chicago inst of Art, many of the public libraries, art galleries and institutions, tax authorities, loss adjusters, insurance companies, art dealers, valuers and auctioneers.

No doubt much of the usage is to do with the value of the art. ASI does after all reflect the open market value through the years.

But there is another aspect of the usage which seems to have taken longer to become appreciated. That is for art research of one kind or another. Let me give you two examples - both of which lean heavily on the ability of the system to interrogate each and every word in the title of a picture. We had one early ArtQuest user who was compiling a book on animal artists. With the aid of ArtQuest, she was able to search titles for such words as horses, cats, hens, goats, dogs etc. and from then to find the name of the artist. Obviously not every picture with the word horse in the title represented an animal artist but they did provide useful guidance.

A second example was a causal user. I have to explain that we do respond to one of requests for information. Not every user has to have a terminal. This second example was an enquiry from the organisers of an exhibition for the town of St. Ives in Cambridge. They wanted to know the names of all artists who had painted in the area. They gave us a list of 30-40 names of nearby towns and villages, names of people associated with the area (Oliver Cromwell was one) of places, bridges, houses. We were able to come up with a list of about 200 pictures by about 30 different artists.

The possibilities for this kind of research in endless so let me put this to you, if you had an index of the titles of 900,000 pictures at your disposal, with every word in their titles capable of being researched - what could you do with it? There is no other organisation anywhere in the world, no national or getty like foundation which can give you this information.

There are other avenues yet to be explored. The names of places in the titles of works by landscape artists also provide a trace of movements of that artist, especially if works are dated. Yet another aspect for research is the ability to discover where an artist's works are being bought or sold in which country or by which auctioneer. This is where »GET« can be used.

Another significant tool for research is the indication in each record which shows whether the picture has been illustrated in the catalogue of the sale. This indication was introduced only in 1975. But there are 458,833 entries on the Data Bank for which illustrations exist. Video disks. This is already being done by some galleries and ASI have the unique capability of being able to link the visual with a superlative index. This feature is connected with another development of ours which is going ahead at the moment. This is the compilation of a register of Stolen Pictures.